

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 OCTOBER 2008

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Matthew 21: 33-46

"Cries we need to Hear"

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. I would be interested to know how you heard that parable this morning and how you understand it. You'll be relieved to know, however, that I'm not going to come through the congregation and ask you.

I venture to suggest that the vast majority who have read or heard this parable over the years have understood it as an allegory of the Christian story. The owner of the vineyard is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the Jewish leaders and authorities, the servants of the owner are the prophets of Israel who were rejected and persecuted, and the son and heir who is killed by the tenants is Jesus. Sound familiar?

That, I am sure, is how Matthew wanted his readers to understand it. Indeed, the sayings that he appended to the parable were intended to make that interpretation of the parable abundantly clear. And it suited Matthew's purpose in writing his Gospel. But is that how Jesus intended the parable to be understood? Indeed is the parable, as we have it in Matthew's Gospel, the parable as Jesus would have told it? There are several reasons to believe that it may not be.

- The parables of Jesus were not allegories, as you have no doubt been told many times. They were stories whose purpose was to focus the attention of the hearers on one particular issue.
- The parables of Jesus almost always leave their hearers with a question to answer, either explicit or implicit. Some examples are: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" "Which of the two did the will of his father?" And this morning's parable should really end with the question: "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"
- There is a basic inconsistency within the parable if it is read as an allegory: in the beginning the vineyard represents Israel (as is so often the case in the Hebrew Bible), but at the end of the parable the vineyard is taken from Israel and given to other tenants.
- As an allegory, the parable presents a post-Easter message rather than a message immediately meaningful to the Jewish audience to whom it was addressed.
- It is highly unlikely that Jesus understood his death as God's rejection of Israel.

For these reasons some scholars consider the whole parable to be an invention of the early church put into the mouth of Jesus. The majority, however, think that behind the parable as we have it in Matthew (and also in Mark and Luke) there is an original parable that Jesus told. If we divorce the parable itself from the sayings that Matthew appended to it, and if we allow the parable to finish with the question,

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

then I think we won't be far from the original parable.

In telling a parable about an absentee landlord and his tenants working his vineyard, Jesus was not being very original. Knowing the Hebrew Bible as he did, Jesus was obviously familiar with Isaiah's song of a vineyard, which is why I chose that as our first reading this morning, and you will have noticed the strong similarities between the two. Isaiah's song, which is an allegory, helps us to understand the original message of Jesus' parable. (Isaiah 5:1-9, 20-24)

The climax of Isaiah's song of a vineyard, which doesn't produce the quality of fruit expected, is the disclosure that the song is an allegory:

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*

Here we have one of the strongest condemnations of the injustice that was so rampant in Isaiah's time. The ruling classes had enjoyed a prolonged period of prosperity, but the poor were being exploited and oppressed, and justice was no longer being administered impartially. God had looked for a community of justice and peace, but instead God heard the cry of the oppressed, the cry of the exploited, and the cry of those who see no relief from their suffering.

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is not all that dissimilar. The situation depicted in the parable was very true to life. There was a great deal of social unrest in Judea and Galilee at the time. This was partly political, resenting Roman rule and the burdens it placed on common people, but it was also economic. Much of the land was held in large estates, many owned by absentee landlords, either foreigners or the ruling class in Jerusalem. The peasants who worked these lands were required to hand over a significant amount of their produce to the owners as rent. Economic depression and nationalist resentment could well have tempted some tenants to withhold payment from their absentee landlords, even resorting to violence in order to avoid payment. Killing the heir in the process may even have been contemplated, for under certain laws if the landowner died without an heir, those in possession of the property could claim it.

So Jesus' parable would have rung a lot of bells for his hearers. Landless peasants would have empathised with the tenants. Absentee landlords, including members of the Jerusalem establishment, would have recognised themselves in the landowner, and heard the parable as a condemnation of them. The parable, like Isaiah's song of a vineyard before it, is a condemnation of injustice and an appeal for justice. And it has a very modern ring about it.

In many parts of the world today millions of people have been driven off their ancestral lands and deprived of their traditional livelihoods; sometimes by natural disasters, sometimes by economic circumstances, often by the consolidation of land ownership in the hands of rich and powerful corporations or individuals. If we listen we can hear their cry.

But theirs is not the only cry we hear today. We hear the cries of those who are forced into unemployment by economic forces. We hear the cries of those who cannot live with dignity on the wages or benefits they receive. We hear the cries of those who live under oppressive regimes, and cannot freely express their political convictions or freely practise their religion. We hear the cries of those who are victims of racism and religious intolerance. We hear the cries of those who have no access to adequate medical facilities or to life-saving drugs. All these cries we need to hear.

And there is another cry we need increasingly to hear. It is the cry of the vineyard itself – the cry of our environment, on which continued human life relies. Creation is groaning under the weight of the burdens we place upon it. There is the burden of overpopulation. There is the burden of increasing

carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels and from the deforestation of large areas of land. There is the burden of soil, water and air pollution by industrial wastes and agricultural pesticides and irresponsible disposal of waste products and poisons of one kind and another. We are being challenged, as perhaps never before in human history, to hear and respond to the cries of millions of our fellow human beings and of our world.

Our response as individuals is not enough, although it is important. We can all make a small difference by changing some of our lifestyles and consumption habits. More important is that governments and industry know of our concern and our willingness to play our part in healing the wounds of our world, its people and its natural order. We can only look for radical change by governments and other agencies if we ourselves are prepared to pay part of the cost of it – quite possibly in higher taxation, in higher energy prices, and in a lower or more modest lifestyle. Unless we are willing to shoulder some of the cost of remedial action, then the cries of the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, the vulnerable, and of our environment will only get louder and the future of life on this planet will be increasingly problematic.

I finish with a quotation, paraphrased, from Isaiah's song of a vineyard:

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is this world,
and the peoples of the world are his pleasant planting;
he expects justice, but sees bloodshed;
righteousness, but hears a cry!*

We too need to hear that cry – and urgently.